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SURVEY OF AGRICULTURAL LABOR CONDITIONS IN CONCORDIA PARISH, LOUISIANA

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This publication is one of a series of 11 with similar titles by Tom Vasey and Josiah C. Folsom. The reports are based on surveys made in the late summer and early autumn of 1936 of the economic and social conditions of adult agricultural laborers. The counties studied represent various types of farming in different parts of the United States, as follows:

<u>State</u>	<u>County</u>	<u>Type of Farming</u>
California	Placer	Fruit
Colorado	Archuleta	Stock-ranch
Illinois	Livingston	Corn
Iowa	Hamilton	Corn-Hog
Kansas	Pawnee	Winter wheat
Kentucky	Todd	Tobacco
Louisiana	Concordia Parish	Cotton (eastern)
Minnesota	Lac qui Parle	Small grain
Pennsylvania	Wayne	Dairy
Tennessee	Fentress	Self-sufficing
Texas	Karnes	Cotton (western)

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SURVEY OF AGRICULTURAL LABOR CONDITIONS IN CONCORDIA PARISH, LOUISIANA

By Tom Vasey, Farm Security Administration
and
Josiah C. Folsom, Bureau of Agricultural Economics

During the depression agencies concerned with rehabilitation and relief in rural areas were frequently called upon to aid farm workers. These agencies, as well as certain others dealing with rural problems, too often found data concerning the 1,500,000 or more hired agricultural laborers in this country altogether inadequate for their purposes.

To provide needed information, therefore, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, through funds supplied by the Works Progress Administration, conducted surveys during the summer and fall of 1936 in 11 counties in as many States. Concordia Parish, Louisiana, was one of the areas selected for study, and this report presents data gathered from laborers found working there.

Enumerators were engaged to canvass the hired farm laborers and their employers, and to fill out schedules with information drawn from each group. The schedule designed for use among the laborers was rather complete. In addition to general characteristics such as age, education, etc., it covered incomes for the previous year, job descriptions, wage rates, work histories for the preceding 12 months, and participation in community affairs. The farm operators employing the laborers contacted during the study were questioned concerning wage rates, fluctuations in number of employees, and methods of obtaining labor. 1

The enumerators were instructed to reach as many farms as possible in the limited time available, omitting those not primarily dependent upon agriculture as a source of income. The exceptions included country estates, livestock dealers, institutions, feed lots, boarding and lodging places, and unclassified farms. As to the laborers, the enumerators were directed to interview "only those hired to do the work of adults at adult wages." With so much of the work -- cotton picking, for example -- done on a piece basis, only persons whom the enumerators considered capable of doing a full day's work were contacted. This policy excluded, in addition to unpaid family labor, children who might be working the full day but whose output would normally fall below that of the average adult.

Concordia Parish lies wholly in the Delta bottomlands of the Mississippi River. Most of its farms are large, three-fifths of them comprising

1 The work was directed by representatives of the Department of Agriculture. However, the members of the Experiment Station staff and of the faculty of Louisiana State University cooperated in making suggestions for the study and in obtaining the enumerators, Earl Grigsby and Mable Cleary of Baton Rouge and Malcolm Seab of Vidalia.

Table 1.- Age and education of 253 agricultural laborers by race and sex, Concordia Parish, Louisiana, September 1936

Age	Race	Sex	Total	Grades completed			
				0 - 4	5 - 7	8	9 or over
				:	:	:	:
15	Negro	Female	1	-	-	-	1
	White	Female	1	-	-	-	1
16	Negro	Male	2	1	1	-	-
	Negro	Female	2	1	-	1	-
17	Negro	Male	6	4	2	-	-
	Negro	Female	1	-	1	-	-
18	Negro	Male	3	2	1	-	-
	White	Male	1	1	-	-	-
19	Negro	Male	7	3	2	1	1
	Negro	Female	1	1	-	-	-
20 - 29	Negro	Male	54	30	16	3	5
	Negro	Female	25	12	9	2	2
	White	Male	4	-	1	3	-
	White	Female	2	-	-	-	2
30 - 39	Negro	Male	35	31	3	-	1
	Negro	Female	21	11	4	4	2
	White	Male	2	2	-	-	-
40 - 49	Negro	Male	20	18	1	-	1
	Negro	Female	18	10	4	3	1
50 - 59	Negro	Male	13	11	1	-	1
	Negro	Female	9	7	1	-	1
60 - 69	Negro	Male	12	8	3	-	1
	Negro	Female	8	3	5	-	-
70 - 79	Negro	Female	1	1	-	-	-
80 - 89	Negro	Male	3	3	-	-	-
90	Negro	Male	1	1	-	-	-
Total			253	161	55	17	20

1,000 acres or more. Although it has some stock and fruit farms, the Parish is devoted primarily to the production of cotton. This study was confined to cotton farms, and, because of their size, relatively few of these were covered. Cotton picking was in full swing while the survey, which lasted from September 1 to September 19, was in progress.

The 27 farms which were visited employed 872 persons at the time; 253 of these workers were interviewed. Data here given are largely from the schedules of these farm laborers and from information obtained from their employers.

General Characteristics

By far the larger number of those interviewed were Negroes. As only 10 of the 253 laborers were white, they have been omitted in most of the following tables. Men and women, old and young, were found picking cotton, whole families frequently working together in the harvest season; but men were far more numerous than women and only adults were interviewed. Race, age, sex, and education of all those from whom schedules were taken are shown in Table 1.

The modal age group was 20 to 29 years, and 34 percent of all those contacted were in this age group. Fifty-six percent were between 20 and 39 years of age. Twenty-five workers under 20 years of age were interviewed but there were also many workers, including one Negro 90 years of age, in the higher age groups.

The women were slightly older on the average than the men, and had had slightly more schooling. However, among both men and women the younger workers had had more schooling than the older ones. Of the total, 40 had never attended school and 121 others had not progressed beyond the fourth grade (Table 1). Only 20 persons, or 8 percent, reported more than eighth-grade work.

Among these workers unmarried men considerably exceeded unmarried women, although a great many of the Negro women were separated or widowed (Table 2, p. 4). The unmarried workers of both sexes were younger than the others. Persons who had been married were not only in the older age groups but they included young people as well.

Despite the fact that the women workers were older and more likely to be married, a greater number of the men reported dependents (Table 3, p. 4). Only one-third of the men as compared with more than three-fourths of the women reported no dependents. A number of women undoubtedly were members of family groups but, since they did not consider themselves as heads of families, did not report dependents. Relatively few persons, either men or women, reported more than 4 dependents, although one family of 13 -- the head and 12 dependents -- was found.

Table 2.- Marital status by age and sex of 243 Negro agricultural laborers, Concordia Parish, La., September 1936

	Total	Unmarried	Married	Widowed	Separated	
Age :	: Fe- : Male					
	Male	male	Male	male	Male	male
10-19	18	5	17	3	2	-
20-29	54	24	18	2	33	18
30-39	35	21	-	1	33	13
40-49	20	18	1	1	13	8
50-59	13	9	-	-	12	-
60-69	12	8	3	-	7	3
70-79	-	1	-	-	-	-
80-89	3	-	-	-	1	-
90-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Unknown	1	-	-	-	1	-
Total	157	86	39	7	100	44
					7	17
					11	18

Table 3.- Dependents of 243 Negro agricultural laborers, Concordia Parish, La., September 1936

Number of dependents	Male	Female		
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
0	51	32.8	68	78.3
1	44	28.2	10	11.5
2	27	17.3	4	4.6
3	15	9.6	3	3.4
4	10	6.4	1	1.1
5	1	.6	1	1.1
6	2	1.3	-	-
7	1	.6	-	-
8	-	-	-	-
9	2	1.3	-	-
10	-	-	-	-
11	2	1.3	-	-
12	1	.6	-	-
Total	156	100.0	87	100.0

These workers showed little mobility. Nearly all of them were born in Louisiana or across the river in Mississippi. Of the 28 who reported residence outside of Louisiana, all but one gave Mississippi (Table 4). Few of the laborers who were residents of Louisiana had sought employment outside their home area. In the year preceding the survey 14 had worked in more than one county, but only 7 in more than one State.

Table 4.- Nativity and residence of 253 agricultural laborers,
Concordia Parish, Louisiana, September 1936

State	:	Totals	Negroes			Whites		
			Male	Female				
			:Resi-:Nativity:	:Resi-:Nativity:	:Resi-:Nativity:			
Louisiana		159	98	141	51	76	10	10
Mississippi		79	47	14	32	11	-	-
Arkansas		6	4	1	2	-	-	-
Alabama		4	4	-	-	-	-	-
North Carolina		3	1	-	2	-	-	-
Kentucky		1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Texas		1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Totals		253	156	156	87	87	10	10

Although there was little shifting in the locale of work, the type of work did not indicate stability. Practically all of those interviewed were harvest hands; a small number gave their jobs as general farm hands, and a few reported specific jobs such as "hauling" or "machine work." Women were doing only harvest work; at another time of the year, with the probable exception of the cotton-chopping period, few if any would have been found at work in the fields.

Tenure Experience

These workers had had but little experience as farm operators. More than half the men had had sharecropper experience but only 7 had been tenants or owners (Table 5). Eleven women had been croppers but none of them had had any other experience as farm operators. The fact that croppers and laborers frequently exchange their positions is indicated by the fact that the number of croppers who were working out for wages was almost as great as the number of laborers who had previously been croppers. Reasons offered for giving up operation of a farm were widely varied, their general tenor being one of discouragement -- inability to make a living (Table 6).

The only considerable source of labor other than farm workers or operators was domestic service; 43 percent of the women reported that a year before they had been either domestic servants or housewives.

Table 5.- Previous farm operation experience by race and sex of
253 agricultural laborers, Concordia Parish, La.,
September 1936

Experience	:	Negro		White	
		Total	Male	Female	Male
None	147	65	77	3	2
Sharecropper	99	85	10	3	1
Tenant	4	4	-	-	-
Cropper and tenant	1	1	-	-	-
Cropper and owner	1	-	-	1	-
Tenant and owner	1	1	-	-	-
Total	253	156	87	7	3

Table 6.- Reasons for termination /1 of sharecropper status given
by 51 Negro agricultural laborers, Concordia Parish, La.,
September 1936

Reasons given	:	Number	Percent
No profit, not able to make a living	17	33.3	
Crop failure	8	15.7	
Landlord discontinued cropper system, died, or quit farming	6	11.8	
Personal misfortune -- house burning, losing stock, etc.	4	7.8	
Poor health	4	7.8	
Alone, no one to help	4	7.8	
Wanted to try something else	3	5.9	
Farm sold	2	3.9	
Flood	1	2.0	
Could not find place, short on acreage	1	2.0	
Trouble with landlord	1	2.0	
Total	51	100.0	

/1 Forty-four other Negro laborers were still croppers, but were found by the enumerators working for cash wages.

Income

In Concordia Parish cotton pickers receive very low annual incomes. Although earnings reported in this study ranged from mere maintenance to \$650, they were noticeably concentrated in the lower brackets (Table 7, p. 8). Four-fifths of the women earned less than \$100; of the men, four-fifths earned less than \$250.

The average income for these Negroes amounted to only \$135.91 annually; for the men alone, it reached \$177.53 but for the women it fell to \$62.36. About three-fourths of the entire income reported came from agricultural earnings, the men receiving a slightly higher proportion of their earnings from farm work than the women. Other members of the family added more frequently, and in greater amounts, to the earnings reported by the men than to those reported by the women.

In practically all cases the men were primarily agricultural workers, but a number of the women used farm income to supplement that from other sources. Within each income-class interval in Table 6 the average agricultural earnings of the men were higher than those of the women and, conversely, in each case the average nonagricultural earnings of the women were higher than those of the men. In the lower income groups a smaller percentage of men reported nonagricultural earnings and in lesser amounts.

Generally among the higher incomes an increasing amount was attributable to nonagricultural employment. Two laborers had relatively high agricultural earnings, one receiving \$450 and the other \$500, but only a few made more than \$200 by working on farms.

Eighteen workers, 14 men and 4 women, had had work-relief jobs during the year, their earnings averaging \$79.39. Ten others received direct relief in meager amounts. The highest work-relief income, \$189, amounted to two-thirds of the total income of this worker. Work-relief earnings were an appreciable percentage of the incomes of all those who were able to get assignments.

Days Worked

Of the 253 schedules taken, 225 were usable to ascertain the number of days worked. Evidently 155, or two-thirds of the workers, had had only agricultural employment although very few had worked full time in the fields (Table 8). None of the women who did only farm work had had more than 150 days of employment and most of them had had less than 90 days. Men who worked solely in agriculture obtained more work than women but a large number of these had had less than 90 days. For both sexes employment in nonagricultural as well as agricultural enterprises improved the chances of securing more days of work. Among the women agricultural work became incidental in most cases to work in nonagricultural employment; among the men, the division of time was more even.

Table 7.- Total income, September 1935 to August 1936, of 239 Negro agricultural workers, Concordia Parish, La.

Total Income	Number	Percent	Agricultural earnings		Nonagricultural earnings		Relief	
			Earned		Earned		Work	
			by laborers	by dependents	by laborers	by dependents	Number/1:Average	Number/Average
\$1 - 49-all	40	16.8	\$27.62	-	2	\$ 6.00	-	-
Male	7	4.6	31.71	-	1	2.00	-	-
Female	33	38.4	26.76	-	1	10.00	-	-
50- 99-all	66	27.0	53.86	15	\$16.87	21	45.86	\$ 6.00
Male	25	16.4	60.40	9	22.67	6	29.67	-
Female	41	47.6	49.67	6	8.17	15	52.33	6.00
100-149-all	49	20.6	88.29	19	13.05	15	39.60	2
Male	41	27.1	91.76	17	11.65	11	38.82	2.00
Female	8	9.5	70.50	2	25.00	4	41.75	10.00
150-199-all	28	11.8	114.18	11	29.45	10	75.00	4
Male	25	16.4	125.40	10	32.10	7	62.29	7.50
Female	3	3.5	37.33	1	3.00	5	104.67	-
200-249-all	25	10.5	160.40	17	23.18	8	105.75	2
Male	24	15.8	166.92	17	23.18	7	91.14	6.00
Female	1	1.2	4.00	-	-	1	208.00	-
250-299 (All male)	11	4.6	7.2	208.36	8	43.25	2	84.00
300-349 (All male)	9	3.8	5.9	194.67	6	26.67	3	199.67
350 and over	10	4.2	6.6	168.89	3	53.33	7	335.14
Total and average	238	100.0	92.12	79	23.86	68	92.32	17
Male	152	100.0	120.19	70	25.47	44	108.95	14
Female	86	100.0	41.67	9	11.33	24	61.83	3

¹ "Number" in each case refers to number of laborers, not to number of dependents.

² A, high as \$650.00.

Work in the woods or construction work along the roads or levees offered most nonagricultural employment to the men, while women turned most frequently to domestic service. Only 5 of the 225 laborers had more than 10 months' work -- that is, 270 days or more. Three of them reported 312 days, or full-time employment.

Table 8.- Days worked in agriculture and in mixed employment by 78 female and 147 male Negro farm laborers, Concordia Parish, Louisiana

Days worked	Mixed employment							
	Agricultural		Male		Female			
	Male	Female	Average Number	Average Number	Average in agri-culture	Average in nonagri-culture	Average Number	Average Number
0-29	17	7	1	13	5	1	2	20
30-59	13	20	5	41	8	-	-	-
60-89	16	13	5	40	31	3	22	55
90-119	16	15	10	41	66	4	56	48
120-149	10	4	7	71	67	3	62	76
150-179	12	-	9	102	60	4	51	110
180-209	5	-	6	86	108	1	2	180
210-239	1	-	2	96	120	1	71	140
240-269	3	-	2	114	144	1	51	200
270-312	5	-	2	226	50	1	3	304
Total or average	98	59	49	74	64	19	42	98

Assets

A few workers reported ownership of important assets. Some owned a cow or a few chickens. Of the Negro men, 2 owned farm land and 10 had other real estate. Only 3 cars were reported by the group. None had bank accounts, but 70 carried life insurance policies averaging \$127 each. This large number was probably due to the various benefit societies found among the Negroes.

Wage Rates

The chief method of payment for harvest hands in cotton is by the piece. A few hands worked by the day, and only one by the month, but 85 percent were picking cotton by the hundredweight. Sometimes picking is done on a piecework basis by family groups, and, as one person receives pay for the group, no record is kept of individual performance. Naturally, the earnings of families in such cases were higher than the earnings of the individuals. Since the number of workers per family varies not

only between families but from day to day in the same family, comparison between sizes of family and earnings is not accurate. But just as single male workers generally receive more pay than single female workers, families with male heads earn more per day than those with female heads.

Wage rates increased noticeably from the 1935 to the 1936 season. In 1935 nearly all laborers were picking cotton at 50 and 60 cents per hundredweight, whereas in 1936 most were being paid 60 to 75 cents per hundredweight (Table 9).

Table 9.- Piecework wage rates and average daily earnings in picking cotton, Concordia Parish, Louisiana, September 1936

Per hundred- weight :	Class of worker /1	Operator reports:			Laborer reports		
		1936		1936	1935		
		Number	Earnings	Number	Earnings	Number	Earnings
\$0.50	Single, total	2	\$0.80	4	\$1.00	46	\$0.87
	" male	-	-	2	1.00	14	.85
	" female	-	-	2	1.00	32	.88
	Family group	1	2.25	18	1.51	13	1.17
	Male head	-	-	16	1.52	8	1.25
	Female head	-	-	2	1.38	5	1.04
.60	Single, total	11	.99	68	.87	56	.95
	" male	-	-	34	1.02	29	1.06
	" female	-	-	34	.73	27	.84
	Family groups	6	2.20	24	1.59	6	2.05
	Male head	-	-	23	1.60	5	2.22
	Female head	-	-	1	1.20	1	1.20
.65	Single, total	1	1.30	-	-	2	1.00
	" male	-	-	-	-	1	1.00
	" female	-	-	-	-	1	1.00
.75	Single, total	12	1.24	66	1.21	2	1.15
	" male	-	-	27	1.35	1	.80
	" female	-	-	39	1.12	1	1.50
	Family groups	7	3.96	27	2.46	-	-
	Male head	-	-	18	2.92	-	-
	Female head	-	-	9	1.56	-	-
Total or average:							
	Singles	26	\$1.11	138	\$1.04	106	\$0.92
	Family groups	14	3.08	69	1.91	19	1.45

/1 As to sizes of family groups see Table 3, p. 4.

In most instances the farm operators reported higher earnings per day than the laborers themselves; this variation is particularly conspicuous in records of family earnings. The average daily earnings for the single workers in 1936 as reported by the operators was \$1.11; as reported by the laborers, they were \$1.04 in 1936 and \$.92 in 1935. Family earnings reported by the operators were \$3.08 per day, but as reported by the laborers they were \$1.91 in 1936 and \$1.45 in 1935. Rates of pay by the day at 75 cents and \$1 were slightly lower than the average earnings at piecework (Table 10).

Table 10.- Wage rates and perquisites furnished Negro farm laborers, Concordia Parish, Louisiana, September 1936

Rates	Operator reports				Laborer reports			
	:Without		:With		:Without		:With	
	:Total	:board	:board	:house	:Total	:board	:board	:house
Per day								
\$0.60	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
.65	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
.75	13	12	1	-	14	6	2	6
.85	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
1.00	7	6	1	-	15	4	-	11
1.25	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	2
1.35	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
1.50	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	2
2.00	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Total	23	19	4	-	35	10	2	23
Average	\$.82	\$.82	\$.80	-	\$.98	\$.85	\$.75	\$ 1.06
Per month:								
\$10.00	4	3	-	1	-	-	-	-
15.00	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
20.00	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
21.00	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
Total	6	4	-	2	1	-	-	1
Average	\$12.67	\$11.25	-	\$15.50	\$20.00	-	-	\$20.00

/1 Operators were not asked for day rates with house, but the laborers' reports indicate that many did furnish their workers with houses.

/2 Only one laborer being paid by the month was interviewed.

Practically all workers on time rates as well as many of those on piecework received some perquisites. Seventy percent of those on day rates received either board or the use of a cabin in addition to a cash wage, and over half the pieceworkers reported a cabin as one of the perquisites furnished with the job. Many of the laborers lived the year round on the farm and were available for work as the occasion demanded. In addition to a cabin a small garden plot was allotted to the laborer so that he might grow some of his own produce.

Tenure of Employment

As one would expect from the earnings at either piece rates or daily wage rates, length of employment is short. At the time these 27 cotton farms were visited, they were employing 872 workers or an average of 32.3 per farm; but during the slack season in January, they averaged 6.0 employees per farm, or less than one-fifth as many. The harvest hands can expect a maximum of 12 weeks of work. Only 24 workers had had the same job previous to August 1936, 90 percent of those interviewed having worked less than 6 weeks at the job on which they were found.

As so many of these cotton pickers live the year round on the farm, placement is rather simple -- either they ask the operator for a job or he asks them to work for him (Table 11). Most of the workers found their own jobs. Operators sought employees in addition to accepting those who came to them. Relief or employment agencies played only a small part in job placements.

Table 11.- Methods of placement of cotton pickers, Concordia Parish, La.

Method	Laborer reports					
	Male		Female		Operator reports	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Laborers' search	16	74.4	54	62.1	23	85.2
Operators' search	10	6.4	14	16.1	24	88.9
Through a friend	3	1.9	1	1.1	-	-
Another employee sent by operator	1	-	-	-	7	25.9
Relief agency	1	.6	-	-	1	3.7
Employment agency	-	-	-	-	2	7.4
Other	26	16.7	18	20.7	7	25.9

/1 Percent of specific jobs secured by the given method.

/2 Percent of the 27 employers using the given method; they may report more than one method, hence this column does not necessarily total 100 percent.

Community Participation

Neither whites nor Negroes reported membership in any farmers' organization or labor union. One Negro attended a farm-practice demonstration, but apparently none of them took part in labor-organization activity.

In other forms of group activity religious meetings ranked first (Table 12); a greater number of Negroes made their social contacts through church services than in any other way. Shopping ranked second. Other group contacts were secured through attendance at community entertainments and ball games. Only one-fourth of the workers had gone to the movies. Social interrelationships are indicated by the rather large number that had visited friends or relatives for an overnight stay or longer at various times during the year.

Table 12.- Community participation of 153 male and 87 female Negro agricultural laborers, Concordia Parish, Louisiana, September 1935 - September 1936

Activity	Male			Female		
	: Number	: Percent	: Average times	: Number	: Percent	: Average times
	: reporting	: reported	: reported	: reporting	: reported	: reported
Religious meetings	142	92.8	55.4	83	95.4	67.8
Shopping	138	90.2	66.6	71	81.6	101.1
Fishing trips	97	63.4	26.8	45	51.7	8.5
Community entertainment						
	78	51.0	46.3	15	17.2	24.5
Ball games	58	37.9	9.4	2	2.3	2.0
Overnight visits	52	34.0	28.8	43	49.4	10.3
Movies	42	27.4	18.6	20	23.0	23.6
Circus	3	2.0	1.0	1	1.1	1.0
Farm practice demonstrations	1	.7	1.0	-	-	-

In summary, the basis of the labor supply on the plantations of Concordia Parish is this uneducated and racially distinct group of people. Both men and women work in the fields. The combination of low wage rates and intermittent employment means meager annual earnings. Many of the workers, though not employed full time, live in shacks on the plantations the year round; others come from nearby villages or come across the river from Natchez, Mississippi. Social contact is primarily within the group itself with little or no outside association. Concordia Parish presents a picture of the evolution of the old plantation with its slave labor emerging as a unit operated with cropper or wage labor. The position of its laboring class has not changed materially from that of earlier times.



